



Community Focus Groups for Reviewing the Health Of Clark County 1998 Update

Southwest Washington Health District

Jim Moeller, Chair, Board of Health

Kay Koontz, Executive Director

Karen R. Steingart, MD, MPH, Health Officer

Project Staff

Melanie Payne, MPH

Maria N. Johnson, BS, RRA

Maya Bhat-Gregerson, JD

Barbara Riehm, RN, BSN

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For more copies or further information contact:

Maria N. Johnson, Assessment Specialist

Phone: (360) 397-3034

Fax: (360) 397-8424

E-Mail: mjohnson@swwhd.wa.gov



Community Focus Groups

INTRODUCTION

The process of assessing the health status of Clark County residents involves the collection, analysis and interpretation of data regarding a variety of leading health problems or factors that affect the health of the population. Community health assessment is conducted at regular intervals to monitor the change in status of the population's health. This process informs us of trends and forecasts of various health problems and identifies areas of public health concern. Routine population-based health assessments allow a community to mobilize its resources effectively in prioritizing and addressing health problems that can be prevented or controlled. These assessments also provide a measure of the effectiveness of programs that are implemented to reduce or prevent various health problems.

As a part of the 1998 assessment of Clark County, the Southwest Washington Health District conducted a series of focus groups throughout this county. The goal was to capture the attitudes, beliefs and opinions of county residents regarding the community's health and their quality of life. The ten focus groups were conducted in January and February of 1998. The information gathered through this process was used to supplement the numerical data presented in the community health status report, *"Reviewing the Health of Clark County 1998 Update."*

PROCEDURE

Focus groups are anonymous discussions with community groups that represent certain segments of the population to gather current opinions on a particular topic. The focus group participants represented youth, senior citizens, rural and urban residents, and

employees in businesses, government, health care, law enforcement, private industry and professional services. The same set of questions was posed to each group of residents, and the discussions that arose were recorded through note-takers and on audio tape for post-discussion analysis only. The questions posed to the focus group participants are presented in Appendix A of this report.

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The following sections summarize the results and findings of the ten focus groups that were conducted in Clark County. The findings are arranged in two sections which detail the perceptions of the focus group participants in terms of benefits of living in Clark County and their concerns about living in this county.

Benefits of Living in Clark County

Community members across all focus groups stated that one of the most attractive features of living in Clark County was the small town atmosphere with easy access to the amenities of a larger



metropolitan area. In all groups, the proximity to mountains and beaches was also considered a benefit. Some participants expressed their appreciation of Clark County as a family-oriented community with a good educational system from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Others were encouraged by the healthy local economy and the employment opportunities. Clean environment and mild climate were also among the benefits experienced by members of these discussion groups.

Community Concerns

The priority areas of concern for participants in the focus groups included population growth, recreational opportunities, crime and violence, health care and health education, education and cost of living.

Population Growth

Most members in the focus groups stated that growth management in Clark County was inadequate. The participants expressed concern at the rapid rate of growth and the corresponding adverse effects on the environment and green spaces in Clark County. Participants believed that air quality was diminishing due to the increased traffic. The most commonly proposed solution to the air quality issue was the development of an efficient and extensive mass transit system within the county to provide residents with an alternative to cars. Increased vehicular emissions testing was another proposed solution. Many members expressed their disapproval of the clear cutting of trees to make room for new buildings. The community members saw a need for maintaining and even increasing green spaces. Others expressed concern for water quality and quantity.

Aside from the negative impacts on the environment the participants believed that growth will take a toll on social interactions and the infrastructure of the county. A rapid rate of growth signified an increase in crime and violence and possibly a decrease in the level of tolerance among community members. Additionally, participants were concerned about the capacity of schools to accommodate the needs of a growing population. There was also concern that the county roads did not have the capacity to handle the number of vehicles in this area.

Recreational Opportunities

Discussion around the issue of inadequate recreational opportunities in Clark County was a recurrent theme throughout the focus groups and involved two distinct problems. First, members were concerned that a lack of adequate recreational facilities such as parks, community centers, bike trails and walking trails adversely impacted the ability of residents to exercise. There was concern that this inadequacy will continue in the coming years and will prevent residents from adopting healthy lifestyles and thus avoiding chronic health problems such as heart disease.



The second problem seen by focus group participants was that the youth in the County do not have sufficient affordable recreational opportunities that support positive development and behaviors. The lack of recreational activities and safe places for youth to gather were believed to be major contributors to the increase in youth crime and gang related activity in the County.

Crime and Violence

According to the participants both the rapid rate of growth and the lack of

recreational opportunities were linked to an increase in crime in Clark County. Further, there was a belief that the law enforcement agencies in this county did not have the capacity to curb the rise in crime in the area. In addition to gang activity, some members believed there was a substantial increase in drug and alcohol related crimes in this area. There was also a belief among some members of the focus groups that the judicial system needed to be more stringent and impose greater penalties on criminals. Community members were also concerned about domestic violence, child abuse, teen pregnancy and tobacco use in the community.

Health care and health education

Several participants of the focus groups expressed a need for health education around prevention of infectious and chronic diseases. They also perceived a need for education around youth tobacco use and prevention of teen pregnancy at the school level.

Many members also wanted expanded mental health services in the county to handle, among other problems, substance abuse issues. There was a concern that the community's existing hospital, number of health care providers and treatment centers were inadequate to meet the demands of a growing population.

Education

The two main problems perceived in this area were an inadequate capacity to handle the needs of a rapidly increasing population and the quality of the available education. Participants were also concerned by the shortage of well qualified teachers and the need to maintain lower student to teacher ratios. Some members believed that the curriculum had not evolved to prepare students for higher education or the challenges of today's job market. A few members expressed dissatisfaction with the higher education opportunities in Clark County. Finally, many members who were parents felt that

the cost of education in this county was rising and that they could not afford to pay for extracurricular activities for their children.

Other issues of concern

The lack of affordable housing was seen as an area of concern both currently and for the coming generations. Participants stated that the cost of living in Clark County was too high. A few members noted that child care was generally unavailable in this area. The childcare that was available was not affordable for many families.

Summary

Focus group participants expressed an appreciation of the proximity of Clark County to places of scenic beauty such as the beach and mountains. Several participants noted that the character of Clark County was very suitable to raising families. Another recurring theme was that Vancouver is ideally situated to enjoy the benefits of a larger metropolitan area because of its proximity to Portland while simultaneously maintaining its “small town” atmosphere.

The top areas of concern for the Clark County focus group participants, both currently and for the next twenty years, included inadequate growth management, the lack of affordable recreational facilities and activities, increase in crime and violence, adequacy of health care services and health education, the adequacy of the quality and capacity of the educational system to handle the challenges of a growing community.

DETAILS OF FINDINGS

CLARK COUNTY COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUPS

After we completed interviewing the focus groups, we compared the notes taken during each session with the audio tape of each session to ensure a complete inventory of issues raised during each session. The second level of analysis involved consolidating the issues raised among all the focus groups by identifying recurrent principal themes from the ten focus groups. These major themes are listed below by question.

Question 1. What are the benefits of living in Clark County?
Smaller community with easy access to larger metropolitan area and its amenities (e.g. airport)

- ◆ Proximity to many outdoor recreational activities and natural beauty (e.g., beaches and mountains)
- ◆ Existence of a sense of community involvement
- ◆ A good place for families
- ◆ Good educational system for kindergarten through twelfth grade (e.g., funding is strong)
- ◆ Good economic growth opportunities
- ◆ Mild, peaceful climate
- ◆ Clean environment (e.g., air and water)
- ◆ Availability of medical and public health services



Question 2. If you could change one health behavior in your community, what would it be? Why and how would you change it?

- ◆ Inadequate exercise due to lack of opportunities (i.e. not enough bike/hike trails, school exercise facilities are not open to public after school hours, not enough parks and green spaces that are safe for young children and adults)
- ◆ Reduce youth tobacco use
- ◆ Reduce smoking in general
- ◆ Reduce use of alcohol and drugs
- ◆ Reduce domestic violence and child abuse
- ◆ Decrease teen pregnancy
- ◆ Increase hand washing (to reduce the spread of disease)
- ◆ Improve poor dietary habits



Question 2a. (Probe) What kind of activities, behaviors, services or attitudes would improve the public health in Clark County?

- ◆ More trails and safer bike/hike places
- ◆ Increase mental health services
- ◆ Increase drug and alcohol services (programs for youth)

- ◆ Control growth and construction
- ◆ Increase youth recreational/activity facilities
- ◆ Expand health education (youth and adults)
- ◆ Improve public transportation system
- ◆ Reduce crime

Question 3. What do you believe is the major impact (positive or negative) on the environmental health (air, water, soil) of Clark County?

Positive

- ◆ Emission testing on air quality
- ◆ Recycling
- ◆ Drinking water quality

Negative

- ◆ Growth/development:
 - traffic leading to air pollution
 - clear cutting leading to loss of habitat for wildlife
 - pollution leading to diminishing water quality
- ◆ Air quality impacted by paper mills (industry)
- ◆ Indiscriminate use of industrial and household chemicals

Question 4. What are your hopes and fears for your children and other children in Clark County in the next 20 years?

Hopes

- ◆ Jobs will be available
- ◆ Health education will be good
- ◆ Positive community interactions will exist

Fears

- ◆ Unaffordable housing

- ◆ Crime
 - violence and gangs
 - drugs/alcohol
 - inadequate law enforcement
- ◆ Growth management
 - green spaces and loss of natural beauty
 - infrastructure inadequate
 - schools/education can't keep pace
- ◆ Air quality will deteriorate
- ◆ Schools/Education
 - inadequate curriculum
 - expensive
 - can't accommodate growth
- ◆ Youth recreation/activities facilities will continue to be inadequate
- ◆ Parenting
 - inadequate skills
 - inadequate supervision of children (2 parents working, single parent)

Question 5. What do you see as the big community health issues in Clark County in 20 years?

- ◆ Growth management
 - water quality
 - air quality (affecteded by transportation)
 - soil
 - natural environment (trees, green space)
- ◆ Recreational facilities needed
 - youth centered activities
- ◆ Health care
 - services needed (hospitals, elder care, respite care, etc.)
 - mental health services needed
 - substance abuse services needed
- ◆ Parenting



- ◆ Public health
 - disease control
 - health education
- ◆ Crime
- ◆ Education
 - funding adequacy
 - quality
 - higher education opportunities
- ◆ Community accountability (and individual accountability)

Question 6. Of all the issues discussed today, what do you believe are the top three community health priorities in Clark County now?

- ◆ Growth
- ◆ Recreational facilities/activities
- ◆ Crime and violence
- ◆ Health care and health education
- ◆ Education

Findings that Reinforce the Opinions of the Focus Groups

The opinions and beliefs expressed by the focus group participants were corroborated by the quantitative data we collected in the course of our 1998 health assessment of Clark County. Some of the indicators that validate the beliefs of the focus group members are presented below. For a more detailed explanation of these highlights and the health status of Clark County residents please refer to *Reviewing the Health of Clark County 1998 Update*.

Growth and Employment

- ◆ Clark County was the fastest growing county in the State of Washington in 1997 and one of the fastest growing in the United States.

- ◆ Clark County's population growth from 1990 to 1997 was 33.1% and was largely due to people moving into the county (e.g. in-migration).
- ◆ Clark County's median household income increased by 29% from 1990 to 1997 possibly due to the growth in technology and manufacturing related job markets.
- ◆ In 1996 the unemployment rate in Clark County was approximately 4.1% which is considered to be a state of full employment.
- ◆ Between 1980 and 1996 the proportion of Clark County residents employed in the manufacturing and government sectors decreased while the proportion of residents working in the service sector increased.
- ◆ In 1996 service sector jobs accounted for 27.1% of the jobs in Clark County.

Water Quality

- ◆ In 1997, about 72% of Clark County's population received drinking water from public systems (Group A and Group B systems) which are monitored routinely for coliform bacteria, nitrate levels and other contaminants.
- ◆ Private wells served the needs of 28% of Clark County's population in 1997. Mandatory monitoring of these water sources was not required. Voluntary testing of private well water samples at the Southwest Washington Health District indicates that just under a third of the samples tested contained coliform bacteria.

Air Quality

- ◆ In 1996, motor vehicle emissions contributed the largest proportion (42%) of the air pollution in southwestern Washington State. Industrial emissions contributed about 38% of the air pollution.
- ◆ In 1995, Clark County ranked second highest in Washington State for number of pounds of toxic substances released into the air per square mile.
- ◆ Since 1994 the Portland-Vancouver area met federal ambient air quality standards for carbon monoxide, ozone and fine particulate matter.

- ◆ From 1993 to 1996, 100% of Clark County residents live in an area that met the federal air quality standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Maternal Child Health – Teen Pregnancy

- ◆ The teen pregnancy rate in Clark County decreased from 57.5 per 1,000 in 1980-82 to 46.9 per 1,000 in 1994-96. Clark County met the national target for pregnancies to females aged 15 to 17 years but did not meet the state target.
- ◆ In 1996 in Clark County, 63% of pregnancies among teens younger than 20 years were to females who were 18 to 19 years old. The pregnancies to 18 and 19 year old Clark County females accounted for 9% of total Clark County pregnancies in that year.
- ◆ Since 1984, Clark County met the goal set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for births to females less than 18 years; in 1996 in Clark County only 3% of the births were to teens while the CDC target was 5%.
- ◆ Smoking during pregnancy is higher among young mothers. In 1996, in Clark County 36% of pregnant women younger than 20 smoked.

Youth Crime and Violence

- ◆ Since 1990, Clark County's juvenile arrest rates (aged 10 to 17 years) for serious violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault) remained below the Washington State year 2000 goal of no more than 4.2 juvenile arrests per 1,000 persons aged 10 to 17 years for serious violent crimes.
- ◆ Between 1990 and 1996, the juvenile arrest rates for property crimes (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson) in Clark County remained below the corresponding rates for Washington State.

Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

- ◆ Clark County's domestic violence arrest rates rose from 3.5 per 1,000 adults in 1988 to 6.7 per 1,000 in 1996. During this period Clark

County's arrest rates have remained above the corresponding rates for the state for all the years except 1995.

- ◆ Child abuse rates remained fairly constant between 1992 and 1995 ranging from 38.7 per 1,000 children aged 18 years and younger to 42.1 per 1,000. However, in 1996 this rate dropped to 27.2 per 1,000 without a corresponding decline in Washington State.

Alcohol and Drugs

- ◆ Age-adjusted drug-related death rates in Clark County increased sharply between the 1980-84 period (2.9 per 100,000 people) and the 1992-96 period (5.3 per 100,000). Clark County did not meet the state and national target of no more than 3.0 drug-related deaths per 100,000.
- ◆ Age-adjusted alcohol-related death rates in Clark County rose between 1987-91 and 1992-96.

Life Styles and Chronic Disease

- ◆ Smoking remains the greatest risk factor for COPD. The age-adjusted death rate for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in Clark County rose gradually between 1980 and 1996. The total age-adjusted death rate for COPD between 1987 and 1996 was at or greater than the national target of 25.0 or fewer deaths per 100,000 people except for 1995.
- ◆ The overall age-adjusted death rate for all heart disease in Clark County decreased from the 1980 rate of 183.6 per 100,000 people to the 1996 rate of 108.4 per 100,000. For coronary heart disease the age-adjusted death rate declined from 158.1 per 100,000 people in 1980 to 84.9 per 100,000 in 1996. Lack of physical exercise is considered a risk factor for heart disease.



Appendix A

Questions Posed to Focus Group Participants

1. What are the benefits of living in Clark County?
2. If you could change one health behavior in your community, what would it be? Why and how would you change it?

PROBE: How would you rate your community's health?

What kind of activities, behaviors, services, or attitudes would improve the public health in Clark County?

3. What do you believe is the major impact (positive or negative) on the environmental health (air, water, soil) of Clark County?

PROBE: Water quality, air quality, solid waste (garbage and recycling), hazardous waste, chemical exposures, occupational health, etc.

4. What are your hopes and fears for your children and other children in Clark County in the next 20 years?

PROBE: How will life in Clark County change in the next 20 years? Will it be better or worse? How and why?

5. Prioritize issues:

What do you see as the BIG community health issue in Clark County in 20 years?

Of all the issues discussed today, what do you believe, are the top three (3) community health priorities in Clark County now?